"Pictures made me trust that the world was larger than I could imagine"

— Margaret LEE

Margaret LEE's art breaks the boundaries of sculpture, photography, and installation. Her work is distinguished by her uncanny pairings of disparate objects, and her "handmade readymades" — objects that could be mass-produced but which she makes painstakingly by hand. In 2012 she received the Artadia NADA award. Recent exhibitions of her work include New Pictures of Common Objects at MoMA PS1 in 2013, the 2013 Biennale de Lyon, and the 2014 Hammer Museum biennial, Made in LA.

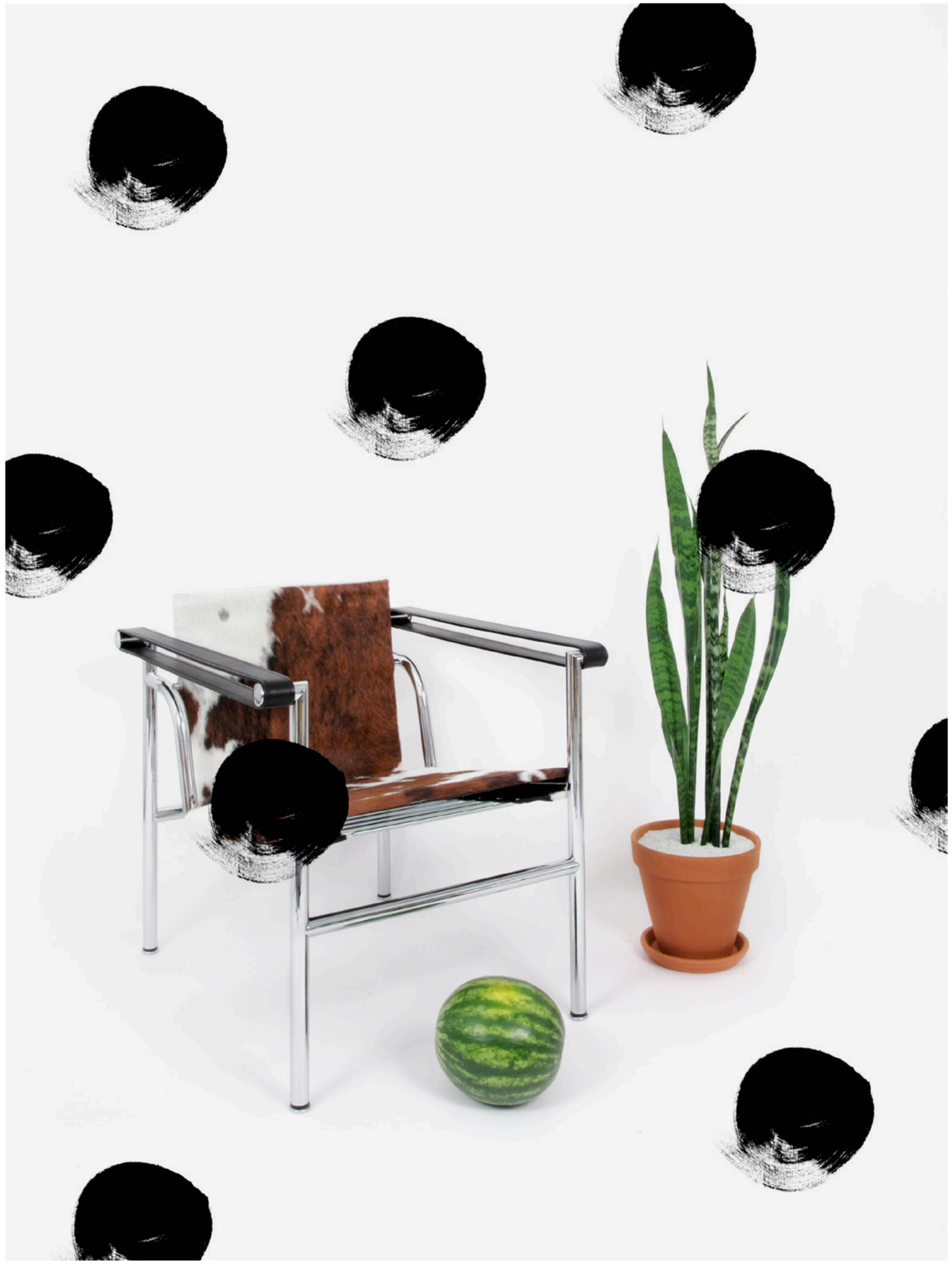
Lee also founded and codirects, with her husband Oliver Newton, 47 Canal, a gallery in New York City's Chinatown. She is a frequent collaborator, and is currently working on a project with Dennis FREEDMAN. After 25 years at *W* magazine as vice chairman and creative director, Freedman moved on in 2011 to the world of fashion retail, becoming creative director at the luxury department store Barneys, New York. At the 2014 Art Basel fair in Switzerland, he curated the inaugural Design at Large exhibition for Design Miami.

For GARAGE, Freedman and Lee trace the threads of fascination and connection that brought them together, and explore the intricate dance of consumerism, value, illusion, and desire.

Margaret Lee: Let's talk about value. We both work in industries in which creativity, commodity, and integrity are on a sliding scale of importance. I've always felt we share affinities in acknowledging these shifting values but still find ways to subvert preconceived notions without being anarchistic. Rather, we play with the codes within the system.

Dennis Freedman: I don't think I am subverting the system. I accept the fact that I am part of a system and believe that what I am doing is, first and foremost, commercial, meaning that the work I do is appropriate for the brand. While some people may ask the question "Is it commercial or is it not?" I prefer to look at the bigger picture.

When I was creative director at *W* magazine, our main competition was *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*, both of which presented clothes in a very direct, straightforward way, using very good photographers and stylists. I believed instinctively that *W* could not succeed by competing on their playing field. Fortunately, that was not the kind of photography that interested me. Furthermore, we had very little money and no history, so we didn't have access to the photographers who were working for our competition. I really believed in the importance of the photograph, so I decided from the beginning that my goal would be to produce strong photo essays. Clothes would be used to help define the character of the women in the story.



Margaret Lee
Chair and Dots, 2013
Archival pigment print
9 × 12 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Hanley Gallery

Juergen Teller: The Clients, Haute Couture, 1999 - Marie-Chantal of Greece, Paris
(photography series made for *W* Magazine, March 1999 issue)

made me trust that the world was larger than I could imagine, and that I would commit my life to finding out what these things were. Much of my work is about how that learning process is fraught and confusing and absurd. Absurdity is a constant in every echelon, because when it comes to personal desire, nothing really makes sense.

DF: My interest in photography was greatly influenced by the work of William Eggleston, Stephen Shore, Garry Winogrand, and Robert Frank, among others. These photographers showed things as they were. Without artifice. The extraordinary in the ordinary. The beauty in the mundane. I have always been surprised and troubled by the fact that women rarely question the depiction of themselves in mainstream fashion photography. In the majority of these images, the models are simply vessels, mannequins wearing clothes. One-dimensional figures. I wanted to show women in all their complexity. Their intelligence. Their strength. Their weakness. Their pain. Their joy. In short, I wanted to tell the truth.

ML: I identify with the challenge of coming up with new approaches in order to level the playing field. I've always felt that I came to art as an outsider – an immigrant kid who didn't quite know how to read the codes. It makes things harder at first, but it produces interesting results later. Photography is what helped me learn. I was obsessed with pictures, and in pre-internet life this meant many hours of sitting in libraries scouring books and magazines for images that would reveal what I was looking for, clues to help me figure out this life that seemed so much bigger than myself. Eventually, I learned to take photos, which helped me in my formative years and continues to help me flesh out ideas within my work. Having a singular view, a controlled perspective, allows me to make sense of objects, in that the flattening of space somehow neutralizes value, as if the hierarchy associated with objects is different from that of images. It's funny saying that as an artist who primarily identifies as a sculptor – I should be more comfortable within the 360 – but being a sculptor who actively addresses the readymade, I need constraints to give me clarity about which objects can be considered as contenders. It's daunting to think that the billions of objects that exist in the world are all at your disposal. There has to be a filter to keep me on track.

When I was poring over those magazines, I believed I was analyzing the pictures in the same way one would analyze a Dutch still life from the 1600s. Unlike TV commercials, which were very direct in telling you what to buy, the editorial images in magazines, though they were also selling, often did so in ways that weren't as direct. I could have been more cynical in thinking they were selling a lifestyle, because – don't get me wrong – there is a very dark side to the selling of "lifestyle." But since I didn't have much access to "high" culture, growing up in a working-class immigrant household, I had to glean whatever I could from wherever I could. Pictures

ML: Much of what we learn about gender constructs comes from what we see in mass media, so it's nice to hear that you conscientiously worked against perpetuating female stereotypes. My work has always tried to readdress power structures and confining dichotomies, especially when it comes to value or how we come to assign value. In pairing one of my watermelon sculptures with a Marni boot, I was trying to neutralize value by equating a fruit with a designer shoe. Within the photograph, the watermelon is a symbol of nature, a non-commodity, in counterpoint to the boot. In the exhibition that included the photograph, I also showed the watermelon sculpture – an artwork that was an exact, hand-cast, and painted replica of a watermelon. Because artworks have historically carried cultural significance, they trump other commodified objects in value. However, outside the exhibition, the value of the watermelon sculpture, because it is such a convincing replica of the actual thing, easily slips back into the value associated with the non-commodity. Despite its non-commodity status, there is still desire attached to the watermelon –

perhaps a simplified, I should say natural, desire – since we are all evolutionarily programmed to desire fruits and vegetables, as they provide sustenance, physical well-being, health.

After dealing with object / image value for a few years, I decided to address value and gender. For my show Reading into Things I wanted to neutralize the values normally associated with male/female and equalize them in regard to the market. I hoped that the simple act of chroming bananas and roses and presenting them on the same platform – in this case, the platform was luxury – would lead to a new reading of traditional symbols of masculinity and femininity as equal in value.

DF: In March 1999, Juergen Teller and I did a couture shoot called The Clients. I wanted to photograph the couture collections on the women who actually wore the clothes. For this particular shoot I was not interested in photographing an 18-year-old, sample-sized model who only wore these clothes on the runway or in advertisements. So Juergen and I and his one assistant, a teenager who worked at his local camera store, showed up at each house to take our pictures. We had no lighting, no crew, no stylists, no hair or makeup. At the time, Oscar de la Renta was designing for Balmain. He chose the American heiress Marie-Chantal Miller, who had become Crown Princess of Greece by her marriage to Pavlos, the Crown Prince. Straight out of Henry James. I remember that everything in the showroom was a different shade of white – furniture, walls, carpet. Perfectly tasteful. Nothing out of place. And then Marie-Chantal appeared in an ethereal white gown, with her beautiful blonde hair perfectly coiffed. I know that she had expected a more impressive camera crew, with proper lighting and stage set. Instead, Juergen simply asked her to sit in one of the chairs that happened to be in the room. Something convenient. He took out his handheld flash camera and started to take pictures. The entire shoot took maybe three or four minutes. Which is pretty average for Juergen. Then he said, "Great! That was really great." Marie-Chantal was a bit confused. I understand why. The picture simply showed her the way she was at that moment in time. There are no chairs made especially for couture dresses. It was a bit awkward. The illusion was removed. The curtain was pulled back. In some small way, truth was told.

Juergen and I have taken this same approach at Barneys. We've worked together for the past five years, taking photographs in cities all over the world. The intelligence, wit, humor, and honesty of his work are totally in sync with the DNA of Barneys. We just did our 10th shoot, in Miami, at the Art Basel fair. In the end, the portfolio was as much a comment on the art market as it was on the current fashion collections. More importantly, it speaks to our customer, who is

Margaret Lee
Do You See What I See (Banana and Rose) (detail), 2014
Steel, chrome, plastic, platinum rose, and alpaca fur
Two pedestals: 16 × 16 × 57 inches each
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Hanley Gallery; Photograph by Joshua White

Barneys New York Prada window installation
[July 2014]

Margaret Lee
Watermelon Boot, 2011
Color photograph
12 x 24 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Hanley Gallery

Margaret Lee
closer to right than wrong/closer to wrong than right, 2014
MDF, plywood, oil paint, gesso, and canvas; Dimensions variable, unique installation
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Hanley Gallery; Photograph by Joerg Lohse

interested in the rituals and ironies of the art world and its relationship to fashion. I strongly believe that it is important to speak to our customer about things that matter beyond fashion.

ML: I love the humanness of it all and I love that photo. It is everything I want in a photograph, in that you can't quite tell what
you should focus your attention on. Though everything in the photo is exquisite, seen out of the context of a fashion magazine the photo becomes something very different. It can be interpreted in many ways beyond showcasing a dress. People often get caught up in wanting so badly to have their lives match certain preconceived notions of taste and success. It is confusing to try to understand why we want, and it is a funny winding path toward what you think you want and the reality of what you get in the end. My "dot" show – *closer to right than wrong / closer to wrong than right* – addressed the confusion that emerges when you want to participate in the consensus of good taste but the inner you creeps in and things take a turn. I was inspired by a scene in David Lynch's *Wild at Heart* in which Sailor gets picked up from jail by Peanut, who brings him his snakeskin jacket. He responds by saying, "Did I ever tell you that this here jacket represents a symbol of my individuality and my belief in personal freedom?" The scene embodies everything I love about America — a place where freedom and consumption go hand in hand, where your possessions are windows into your soul. Again, this can be a depressing thought, but I love the weirdness of unfettered desire. Consumption is just another path to finding truth, if you accept that the results can be unexpected.

My dot show started with the transference of Sailor's connection to snakeskin to dots. I had been working with dots in relation to painting gesture, and thought it would be funny to connect dots to something sentimental, which immediately brought me to the dalmatian. The show was about a personality type that amused me, someone who first and foremost loved dalmatians and wanted to make that love apparent to the world by customizing their objects to match dalmatians, even if that meant painting a Brancusi or a Zig-Zag chair – objects that have actual market value, a value that's eroded when you make them fit within your personal values. I saw it as a total loss of control under the guise of completism. I'm also fascinated by people who can't let go of control, who need their desires to match those pernicious preconceived notions of perfection. The title of the show played with the ambiguity of that back and forth – closer to wrong or right, who knows?

DF: It's important to understand that there are different paths. I've always been inspired by the way that Helmut Lang developed, over the span of his career, extraordinary and unique advertising campaigns. His approach was revolutionary. He understood that a photograph of Louise Bourgeois by Bruce Weber or a Robert Mapplethorpe self-portrait defined his world more than any single image of clothing. He understood how to create desire. He understood the bigger picture. He understood that fashion was only a small part of a much bigger world – a world of art and culture. To me, he was the great Renaissance man of fashion.

ML: Decisions like that keep me from being overly cynical or critical of commercialism. Desire and consumption are not all bad if they lead you to something greater than yourself. One of the books that really helped me understand this is *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* by William Leach. I was fortunate enough to take a seminar with him in college. Before then, I hadn't connected the development of the modern American character with consumerism. The idea that department stores have supplanted churches, and that acquisition could be tied to virtue, was mind-blowing. But what I took away primarily was that this new art of display created a standardization of taste and beauty
and continues to lead us down the rabbit holes of desire.

DF: The thing that intrigued me most when I came to Barneys was having the opportunity to rethink the whole idea of window installations. I was interested in exploring things such as performance, sound, and movement. I had no experience. No preconceptions. I was simply dealing with an empty space 15 feet long, 6 feet deep, and 10 feet tall. The possibilities were endless. The only thing I did know was that I was not interested in making traditional, static displays. I wanted to work with scientists, choreographers, architects, artists, filmmakers. The people who are shaping the cultural life of our city. I wanted Barneys to be part of that. I inherited an extraordinary creative legacy, and I felt a responsibility to add, in my own way, to that legacy.

ML: I admire you for using your far-reaching influence to present your audience with options rather than rules.

DF: You and I are now working together on an ambitious installation. I have wanted to work with you for a long time. As you said, you've always been fascinated by what we covet and why we covet. When I thought of doing all six windows, both uptown and downtown, I wanted to explore the idea of "objects of desire." I couldn't think of anyone more appropriate than you to collaborate with. I've learned so much over the past few months, through the process, the exploration of ideas, and seeing how you think and work.

Barneys
New York Prada window installation
[July 2014]